those who favor fire

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those who favor fire

by calciseptine

Summary

When the world does not end, Stan sits down on the unbroken step of the back porch and pulls a cigar case out from the inner pocket of his tattered suit coat.

Notes

Once, Alex Hirsch said, "Grunkle Stan would absolutely smoke a cigar." How could he have known that he would send fandom into a spiraling fit of want with these seven simple words?

Thank you, Cheez, for bringing this to my attention. This is for you. ♥

This fic is now available in Russian! Many thanks to madnessfk for their hard work.

When the world does not end, Stan sits down on the unbroken step of the back porch and pulls a cigar case out from the inner pocket of his tattered suit coat. There is only one cigar left. Stan smiles at the sight, though the expression is weary and does not reach his shadowed eyes.

"I was saving it for something special," Stan says. Ford is the only person within earshot—the children are sleeping safely inside the house—but Stan's voice is low and aimless, directed at no one. "I guess watching your grand niece and nephew fight a nightmare demon and avert the apocalypse is about as special as it gets."

Stan pulls the last cigar out and closes the gunmetal case with a click. Then he pulls a guillotine cutter and a butane lighter from the same inner pocket. Ford raises an eyebrow at his preparedness. Stan must have been carrying those items with him for the entirety of Weirdmageddon, as he would have had little to no opportunity to have stolen back into the cabin since the event begun.

"And how long have you been waiting?" Ford asks as Stan raises the cigar to his nose and inhales the heavy scent of cedar and tobacco. "For something special, specifically."

Stan's mouth quirks into an actual grin. The expression emphasizes the deep wrinkles in the corners of his warm brown eyes.

"Awhile," Stan replies.

Ford does not know the value of that measurement. He has been gone from his home dimension for too long—been out of his brother's life for even longer—that he cannot determine if 'awhile' means weeks, or months, or years. The only thing Ford can deduce is that, however long 'awhile' has been, it has not been long enough for Stan to forget how to prepare his cigar.

The small ritual is a sight ingrained into Ford from childhood. Their father smoked cigars two or three times a week, after long days in the pawn shop or with friends who crowded around the kitchen table to play hold 'em and drink rye whiskey, and the way Stan lines the guillotine cutter just above the shoulders of his cigar is momentarily overlaid with nostalgia. It ends as Stan cleanly and deftly slices the head off, the cap tumbling to the desiccated grass. Stan ignores and brushes the fine excess from the cut end.

Satisfied that the cigar is free of debris, Stan picks up his heavy silver lighter and expertly flicks it into life. This action also reminds Ford of their childhood; this time, however, he remembers the way an eight-year-old Stan struggled to use the cheap plastic lighter he had stolen from the convenience store. Stan's small fingers had fumbled with the wheel and his over-sized front teeth had dug sharply into his bottom lip in frustration. Ford had tried giving Stan useless advice —like how to hold the lighter and how much pressure to exert—until Stan had thrown the tiny thing at Ford's chest and shouted, "If you're such a know-it-all, then you do it!"

There is little trace of that boy in the man next to Ford. Only the color of his eyes, the cowlicks in his hair, and the softness of his heart are the same.

Holding the cigar in one hand and the lighter in the other, Stan slowly rotates the cut end of his cigar above the fire. The cigar fights the flame but Stan is patient; he simply turns and turns and turns the cigar until the wrapper is blackened and the tip smolders. Stan blows on the foot so he can inspect the evenness of the burn. When it holds up to his scrutiny, Stan sets aside his lighter, put his lips around the unlit end, and takes a shallow, experimental draw. He holds the smoke in his mouth for a moment, then blows it out; the translucent white gas curls upwards, and temporarily obscures Stan's time worn face.

Watching Stan smoke has always been one of Ford's secret pleasures. As a teenager, Stan had looked ridiculously attractive with his red mouth curled around the golden end of a cigarette filter; Ford had always fantasized about tangling his fingers in Stan's slicked back hair and chasing the bitterness of the smoke with his tongue. This is perhaps why it is not odd nor unexpected for Ford to appreciate the weight of the cigar against the damp swell of Stan's lip.

They sit on the unbroken step of the back porch for over an hour. Stan smokes his cigar slowly. Gravity takes care of the ashes as he sips the smoke like fine wine, holding it in his mouth before gently exhaling, nothing left on his tongue but the nuances of tobacco. Between puffs, Stan often pauses to stare into the darkening depths of the coniferous forest that surround the cabin.

In those quiet moments, it is impossible to tell what Stan is thinking about.

Ford watches Stan openly. He never once tires of the ritual, of the way Stan's chest rises on an inhale, of how his eyelashes touch his cheeks as he exhales, of the way he slowly unwinds in the crimson and ochre light of the setting summer sun. The nicotine-laden meditation is as soothing to Ford as it is to Stan. Their silence is easy, in a way that it has not been since those half-remembered nights spent on swing set on a beach in New Jersey, and Ford wishes—in the unreasonable and damnable part of his mind that refuses to bend to logic—that this peace between them will never end.

But inevitably, Stan reaches the end of his cigar. He holds the remains out and waits for the stub to extinguish by itself. The burning end glows like an old red star in the last cycle of its life; yet rather than exploding into a supernova, it simply burns out. Stan then flicks the cigar nub to the dirt to decompose with the clipped head and the ashes.

"Well then?" Ford asks, prompting Stan to meet his gaze. "Was it worth the wait?"

Stan's half-lidded eyes are inscrutable as he leans into Ford's space and curls one broad palm around the nape of Ford's neck. His hands are dry and covered in calluses that scrape pleasantly against the thin skin. The action sends a familiar shiver down the length of Ford's spine; it's been over forty years since Stan has touched him with such intent, but it would be impossible for Ford to misunderstand the need that vibrates in every single atom he possesses.

"No," Stan answers softly—truthfully—bitterly. "It wasn't."

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